

**First United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Lectionary Study Guide**

For use the week of December 17-23, 2018

4th Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a

^{5:2} But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Commentary

The prophet Micah lived and preached in the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Unlike his contemporaries, his origins were in the countryside. He was greatly disturbed by the sins of city folks and deeply concerned for the poor, oppressed shepherds and farmers whose lot he had shared as a child. Corruption, deceit, and moral decay had penetrated families, so that “your enemies are members of your own household.” (7:6) Not even the religious leaders could be trusted, as the priests and prophets were corrupt, conducted empty, meaningless ceremonies, and continued assuring people of God’s blessing and guidance despite growing evidence to the contrary. What God wanted was not hollow ritual or self-righteous posturing, but “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (6:8) Since such spiritual integrity was nowhere in evidence, the people most certainly would be punished—through the imminent conquest by Assyria. Beyond that judgment, however, Micah offers hopeful signs of a new day and a renewed and restored people, under the leadership of a ruler to be born in Bethlehem. God’s grace and deliverance would follow calamity and dispersion. Today’s reading brings this hopeful promise into focus. Micah’s message left a lasting impact. His warnings were cited a century and a half later by Jeremiah. His words about family enmity were quoted by Jesus, and his statement of God’s moral and spiritual requirements laid the groundwork for Jesus’ summary of the divine law. This passage is viewed by Christians of all ages as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

Reflection

What comparable systems of moral and spiritual decay do we see around us? What responsibility do we hold within ourselves to help heal those things?

Hebrews 10:5-10

^{10:5} Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." ⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Commentary

The writer of Hebrews has put these words in the mouth of Jesus, showing that what God wants of us is not ritual sacrifice but the devoted commitment and sacrificial service that Jesus offered. Heartfelt obedience is the only true sacrifice. Several other books of the Bible reflect this same theme—Micah, the Psalms, Hosea, Isaiah, and 1 Samuel, to name a few. The sacrifices and burnt offerings prescribed by the law (meeting legal and ritual obligations out of a sense of duty) could not open a way to a personal relationship with God based on heartfelt repentance and divine forgiveness. This was only possible through Christ because it was Christ who freely and fully did God's will. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice because He willingly chose to manifest God's redemptive love by resisting evil through giving Himself to death. He thereby did away with the regime of ritual sacrifice and replaced it with self-giving love as a model for God's relationship with us and ours with one another. Through Christ's offering of Himself, the way is opened for us to be purified and dedicated to this same cruciform (cross-shaped) way of life.

Reflection

Can you imagine what an adjustment it must have been for people accustomed to thinking they had met their religious obligations by paying for a goat or dove to be slaughtered to be confronted with the demand to change their whole way of life? How do we think of our religious obligations? What changes does God want in our way of life?

Luke 1:39-45

^{1:39} In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit
⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Commentary

This reading sets the stage for Mary's Magnificat, which follows. After her encounter with the angel Gabriel who had announced that God had chosen her to give birth to the Messiah, Mary set out in a hurry to visit her cousin Elizabeth in an unnamed village in the Judean hills. Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist, and the baby's response indicated a distinct recognition that this pregnancy of Mary's was no ordinary one. These two little boys would be involved in some momentous happenings in the years to come. Elizabeth acknowledged the special role Mary and her baby were to play, a sentence that would be repeated by millions of believers for ages to come: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth began to wonder out loud why God had enabled her to recognize that the One destined to reveal God's saving love to all humankind—and thereby to change the course of history—was present there with them in her cousin Mary's womb. The spirit used her to pronounce a blessing on Mary for accepting the role thrust upon her of becoming a mother of the long-awaited Messiah.

Reflection

Do you ever wonder why God has chosen you for special opportunities? What does God expect of you? How have you responded in the past?

Responsive Psalter

Luke 1:47-55

^{1:47} "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.